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ABSTRACT

Programs designed to train salespersons often focus on familiarizing them with the service or product they will sell. Little time is spent on subtleties such as determining the appropriate interpersonal distance between salesperson and customer during negotiations. Two studies were conducted to examine how a friendly overture by a salesperson (touching) is seen by salespeople and by customers. In the first study, salespeople (N=18) in the fields of real estate and life insurance judged controlled photographs of a salesman touching or not touching a customer. In the second study, touch was experimentally manipulated by having a confederate role-play a salesperson selling a product. Subjects were 46 female undergraduates who were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no-touch, social-polite touch, or friendly touch. The results of study 1 showed that salespeople assumed that being touched in a moderately invasive way was uncomfortable for the customer. The results of study 2, however, showed that customers in a role-playing situation responded positively to moderately invasive touching by a salesperson. (Author/NB)

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When Salespeople Touch Customers: Reactions and Perceptions

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Abstract

Two studies examine how a friendly overture by a salesperson, specifically, touching, is seen by salespeople and customers. In the first study, salespeople in the fields of real estate and life insurance judged controlled photographs of a salesman touching or not touching a customer. The second study experimentally manipulated touch by having a confederate role-play a salesperson selling a product. Study 1 showed that salespeople assume that being touched in a moderately invasive way is uncomfortable to the customer. However, Study 2 showed that customers in a role playing situation respond positively to moderately invasive touch. The discrepancy between the findings is examined.

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Perhaps the most common way to try to increase salesperson effectiveness by training is through programs to familiarize them with the service or product they will sell. Little time is spent with such things as the extent to which they should appear confident, professional, friendly or similar to the customer (Weitz 1981). Even less emphasized are such subtleties as how one identifies the appropriate interpersonal distance from a customer during negotiations.

Interpersonal distance is a characteristic of an interaction that researchers in nonverbal behavior call "nonverbal intimacy". Nonverbal intimacy includes leaning forward, touching, smiling, standing or sitting close, and looking into the other person's eyes. For a general review of the role of nonverbal behavior in social influence see Heslin and Patterson (1982); for a broad review of the role of touch (the topic of this paper), see Heslin and Alper (1983).

Although there are some exceptions (Albert and Dabbs 1970; Breed and Ricci 1973), most studies have found touch and close distance to facilitate social influence. For example, when a confederate asked a person, for a favor, she was more successful when she stood close to him than farther away (Baron and Bell 1976). Similarly someone is more likely to sign a petition (Willis and Hamm 1980), return money found in a pay telephone, or give a dime to a stranger who asks for it if the asker touches him on the arm as she asks (Kleinke 1977). Yet, the more we

study the effects of standing close, touching and other types of nonverbal immediacy, the more we realize that people's reactions to them are conditional on other factors. For example, when a person who is asking for volunteer assistance stands close, he or she gets more help if the request appears to be legitimate, but less help if it appears to be trivial (Baron 1978). The question of the legitimacy of nonverbal intimacy is central to its use in any given selling situation. This study examined the role of invasively friendly behavior by a person who is likely to be seen as trying to influence the recipient.

We have found only one study that looks specifically at touch in a selling situation. It deals with the effect of touching shoppers in a supermarket while asking them to sample a new brand of pizza (Smith, Gier, and Willis 1982). Compared to those who were not touched, shoppers who were touched were more willing to both try the pizza and buy it. However, they did not rate the pizza as being tastier. Why, then, did they buy it? As Baron (1978) has suggested, people may go along with an intrusive requester, not because they like her more or think that she likes them more, but because they think she is more anxious to sell. The previous example serves to illustrate one reason why a person may not want to touch someone in an influence situation. Touching may indicate that the toucher has too strong a need to gain compliance.

However, one should not conclude too quickly that touching will cast the toucher in a negative light. There is also evidence that a person who is being touched is seen as lower status, less warm, and less assertive compared to people who are simply conversing, and especially less so than a person who is doing the touching (Major and Heslin 1982). Thus, touchers were viewed positively and recipients were viewed negatively.

Based on the above findings we propose a view of touching that is based on two underlying assumptions (Heslin and Alper 1983). First, it is assumed that touching is understood to be a bonding gesture by most people. Second, it is assumed that in order to be viewed as good or appropriate, touching should reflect equivalence between the intimacy of the touch and the intimacy of the relationship (relational congruence).

How then is a consumer to respond when he or she is touched by a salesperson? This report describing two studies of perception and reaction to touch in the selling situation.

STUDY 1

Based on previous research (Baron 1978; Smith, Gier, and Willis 1982; Major and Heslin 1982) one would expect a salesman who touches to appear more self-confident, assertive and desirous of making a sale then one who doesn't touch. It is assumed that the friendly touch will not be too intrusive compared to the relationship between the salesman and his customer.

Method

Subjects and design. The experimental design for Study 1 was 3 sets of photographs x 3 levels of touch in each set with 6 subjects rating each of the three sets. Professional salespeople were identified from the real estate and insurance sections of the yellow pages. Care was taken to select respondents within the following constraints: an equal number of men and women, an equal number of real estate and insurance people, and no more than one female and one male from the same agency.

The design of the study called for each of the participating salespeople (N = 18) to judge photographs depicting the three different levels of touch (no touch, handshake, hand on upper back and shoulder). To reduce the transparency of what was being studied, each of the three levels of touch a salesperson saw showed a different pair of persons. The assignment of stimulus materials to each interview was established by a partial latin square design. Each subgroup of salespeople viewed all three touch conditions in a random order and each saw all three pairs of actors. However, each set of salespeople judged a given pair of actors in only one touch condition.

This method insured that individual judges wouldn't know which of the changing characteristics of the photographs (size of salesman, attractiveness of customer, age of salesmen, etc.) was being studied. As such, threats to internal, and construct, validity would be reduced. Since the major experimental/independent

variable of interest, touch level, was a within-subjects factor, there were 18 respondents for each of the three levels of touch. Hypothesis testing was on levels of touch collapsing across sets.

Materials. Each of the nine photographs depicted a salesman interacting with a male client in what appeared to be the salesman's office. Each pair (of the three pairs of men) posed for the following scenes: a) a no touch, photograph in which the two men stood facing each other as if conversing, b) a social-polite touch, in which they were shaking hands, and c) a friendly-warm touch, in which the salesman had his hand on the upper back of the client as if to guide him to a chair.

Procedure. Respondents were tested in their own offices. The interviewer asked questions about the business, presented three photographs one at a time to the respondent, asked questions about each, and ended with some general questions about selling and the use of touch with clients. The salespeople were asked to judge the pictures on a number of rating scales. They rated the salesman's warmth, approachability, competence, sincerity, naturalness, assertiveness, status, self-confidence, likelihood of making a sale, desire to make the sale, and liking for the customer. They also rated whether they thought the customer liked the salesman.

Results and Discussion

Differences between touch conditions: Ratings. Levels of touching (No touch, handshake, and hand on upper back and shoulder) in the photographs affected the ratings of how assertive they thought the salesperson was being ($M = 4.7$ no touch; $M = 4.8$ handshake and $M = 5.7$ hand on upper back), $F(2,15) = 3.33$, $p < .05$. There was also a tendency for touch to affect ratings of "How important the sale was to the salesman" (Mean score of 3.9, 4.2, and 4.9, respectively), $F(2,15) = 2.40$, $p < .11$. There was no effect of touch on ratings of salesman self-confidence.

Difference between touch conditions: free response. To complement the rating information and to give the respondent an opportunity to respond in their own words, we asked our respondents to look back at the two photographs that showed a handshake and hand on upper back, and said "How do you think the customer feels about being touched by the salesman?" and "How do you think the salesman feels about touching the customer?" Later we realized that each salesperson's comment would be coded as positive, neutral, or negative to answer the question, "How do salespeople feel about touch in a selling situation?"

Three blind coders assigned scores to the three levels of affect: negative, neutral, positive (1, 2, and 3, respectively). Median interrater agreement was .88 percent; median interrater

reliability was r = .93. A two-way analysis of variance (two levels of touch by two persons being rated: customer vs. salesman) was conducted. Since the raters had such high agreement, one of the sets of ratings was chosen randomly for analysis.

This analysis indicated that in the eyes of our salespeople, 1) the handshake (M = 2.53) was more pleasant than the hand-on-upper back (M = 2.15; F 1,64 = 4.51, $p < .05$), and 2) the customer tended to feel more negative (M = 2.18) than the salesman (M = 2.5; F 1,64 = 3.23, $p < .10$).

Of the four cells, the most negative feelings were those attributed to the customer who was having a hand placed on his upper back (interaction F 1,64 = 19.46; $p < .001$). Newman-Keuls analysis indicated this condition was significantly ($p < .001$) different from the other three conditions which did not differ from each other.

Typical comments. To understand how salespeople react to a depiction of a salesman touching a customer, here are some examples of what they said about the photographs. There was a general feeling that when the customer is shaking hands he feels comfortable. "Comfortable, at ease."

Descriptions of how the salesman felt during the handshake were generally positive. "He's giving him a good handshake and he has a smile on his face. I believe he feels good about that."

The salesman's hand on the customer's upper back, was seen

as a situation where the salesman seemed to be feeling good: "At ease doing it." However the customer was seen as feeling: "Manipulated, like a doctor's patient -- inferior." In general, salespeople see customers' reactions to being touched on their upper back as one of discomfort.

Conclusion from Study One

Two of the finding in this study seem especially noteworthy. First, shaking hands did not seem to very different from not touching and both of these levels of touch indicate less assertiveness and eagerness than putting a hand on a customer's upper back. Second, our salespeople also felt that the customer who was touched on his upper back would be the most uncomfortable of the three situations presented. In the eyes of our observers, "Reach out and touch someone" doesn't seem to work. There was much more negative perception than anticipated to what we had envisioned to be a friendly touch.

How do these findings bear on the assumptions that touch is a bonding gesture and that there must be congruence between the touch and the intimacy of the relationship for it to be received favorably? It would appear that in the eyes of our salespeople the pictured salesman is using a level of touch that exceeds the level of intimacy between himself and his customer. This perception had not been expected, given the positive effect of touching in previous research.

Two strengths of this study were that it experimentally

varied stimuli and used real salespeople for respondents. In a second study that was already under way, invasive friendliness by a salesperson was examined by testing it in the laboratory.

STUDY 2

This second study was conducted first to study actual touch, not just touch depicted in photographs, and second, to focus on the person being touched instead of the toucher. The general expectations were the same as for the first study, but it was not meant to be replication of the first study.

Method

Subjects and design. Forty-six female undergraduates volunteered to participate in a study of selling behavior. They were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no-touch, social-polite touch and friendly touch.

Procedure. The subject reported to the room ahead of a second female "subject" (one of two accomplices who were blind to the hypothesis). The experimenter explained to both women that she was investigating consumer behavior and needed them to role-play a seller and a buyer. As a result of a pseudo drawing (both slips of paper in the box said "buyer"), the subject was given the role of the "buyer" and the confederate was given the role of "seller." After the drawing, the experimenter took the confederate to another room so that she could "study the materials."

The subject was told that she should try to react exactly as she would if she were in a real buying situation, that she did not have to "buy" the product, a coupon book, and that she would be asked to make a buying decision and fill out a questionnaire at the end of the role-playing.

The confederate was brought back to the room. The subject stepped out of the room, shut the door and then knocked on it. The confederate opened the door, welcomed the subject, showed her to a chair, and described the advantages of the coupon book she was selling. After the seller had finished describing the features of the coupon book, she told her that there were five different size of coupon books and that a person saved more money by purchasing a larger book. The customer was then asked which size and how many she wanted to buy.

The confederate then escorted the subject to the door and told the experimenter that they were finished. The experimenter gave them both rating sheets and the confederate went to another room to "fill out her form." After the subject finished the form, she was told the real focus of the study by the experimenter.

Touch conditions. Three levels of touch were used: (a) no touch; (b) social-polite touch, the seller shook the customer's hand when she entered the room and when she was leaving; and (c) friendly-warm touch, the seller shook hands, guided the customer to a chair by placing a hand on her upper back, touched her on the arm three times during the presentation, and shook hands when

she left.

Dependent variables. The questionnaire given to each subject consisted of bipolar rating scales that measured the subject's mood, how much she liked the saleswoman, how much she liked the room, ratings of characteristics of the saleswoman such as confidence, competence, dominance, trustworthiness, perception of the saleswoman's degree of desperation, and her effectiveness, plus a check on the manipulation of touch. There was an expectation for the influence of touch on each of the dependent variables based on logic and previous research.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. We asked each subjects whether she had been touched by the seller. We were surprised to find no significant difference in awareness of being touched between the social-polite touch and the no touch condition. Apparently, a handshake did not qualify as a "touch" in the minds of our subjects. Since response to the friendly-warm touch condition was significantly different from both the no touch and handshake conditions, and since the handshake group did not differ from the no touch group in response to any questions, the no-touch and social-polite touch groups were combined to form the no touch comparison group.

Insert Table 1 about here

The effect of touch. As can be seen in Table 1, the customers who were touched (compared to those who were not touched) felt better, liked the salesperson, felt the salesperson liked them, felt more influenced by the salesperson and would consider buying something from the salesperson in the future (All findings $p < .05$, one-tailed). There was also a tendency for the touched customers to rate the salesperson as being more dominant than did those who were not touched.

In general, the findings corroborate earlier ones in which touch recipients felt better (Fisher, Rytting, and Heslin 1976) and touchers were rated as being more assertive, higher status and warmer than recipients (Major and Heslin 1982; Summerhayes and Suchner 1978). Touchers tend to be given positive evaluations.

One reason that friendly touch was successful may reside in how it was operationalized. To make the touch seem natural, our confederates made the friendly touch moderately non-intrusive by a host of other verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as smiling and saying "Why don't you come and sit down over here." (Care was taken to smile and say the same thing in the other two touch conditions.) Since we wanted to see how people reacted to touch as they would normally, we could not make the intimate touch

manipulation be intrusive enough to be a real invasion of privacy without a high likelihood that the subjects would suspect that the subject of the research was touching. The touch would not have seemed reasonable.

Since the saleswoman did not have an opportunity to build up a relationship with her customer, it is still somewhat surprising that the general effect of the friendly touch was a positive response. This second study gives some perspective on study 1; it indicates that touching can have a positive influence in a selling situation.

These results should be generalized with caution since the participants were role-playing, no real purchase was to be made, both the saleswoman and customer were undergraduates, and both were women. Nevertheless, because subjects were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, the second study was conducted in a situation that increased the internal validity of the research.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Salespeople felt that customers don't like it when a salesman puts his hand on their upper back. They saw such an act as indicating that he is assertive and perhaps anxious to make a sale. Yet, the second study found that the use of such friendly touch in a simulated selling situation made a recipient generally more favorable toward a saleswoman. The customers not only liked the saleswoman but they wanted to buy from her in the future. The same kind of touching that was viewed negatively when

depicted in the photographs seemed to facilitate the personal and business relationship in the laboratory.

As with any study we had to select constants and variables from an array of potentially important effects; one cannot include everything. Unfortunately, such a selection process places limitations on the generalizability of results. One variable that was not fully manipulated in this study was the gender of the salesperson and customer. Although some variability in gender was sought in these studies, the absence of all combinations of gender presents problems. In the U.S. society, touching between males is not common and tends to be less intimate and more cautious than between women (Heslin & Boss, 1980; Heslin, Nguyen & Nguyen, 1983; Jourard, 1966; Nguyen, Heslin & Nguyen, 1975).

Furthermore, cross sex and same sex touching have their own particular set of meanings, depending on how well acquainted people are. For example, averaging across a range of kinds of touch, women are much more negative toward touches from strangers (both sexes) and from women than from their close friend of the opposite sex; men on the other hand, are more negative toward touches from men than women. How well the toucher is known to the man is much less important than his or her gender. If its any woman that's touching him in a friendly way, he likes it; if its a man, he does not (Heslin, Nguyen & Nguyen, 1983).

It is possible therefore, that in our study, the salespeople

were reacting to, not only the touch level, but to the fact that it was between two males. As for the two females in study 2, since touching is more common between women, it would be less likely to be considered overly friendly by the recipient. Future research needs to assess the relative importance of these factors.

Study 1 and Study 2 can be seen as reflecting the two sides of intimacy in a selling situation. If and when it is appropriate to the relationship and the situation, intimacy initiation is likely to be responded to positively. But if the situation or relationship is not appropriate to the level of nonverbal intimacy initiated, a negative response can be expected.

Table 2 about here

Both studies are consonant with the assumption that consumers react to touching as a bonding gesture and the need for the touch to be congruent with the relationship for it to be received favorably. (See Table 2 for such a description of the functional relationship). The formula in table 2 would seem to indicate that touch takes on importance as it interacts with the social relationship of the two parties. An interesting extension of this model would be to apply it to not just other nonverbal behaviors, but to other bonding gestures, such as the use of a person's first name.

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TABLE 1

RATINGS OF A SALESWOMAN BY CUSTOMER FOLLOWING BEING TOUCHED OR NOT TOUCHED BY SALESWOMAN

Question	No touch n = 31	Touch n = 15	Planned contrast	One-tailed probability
Do you feel better	2.54	4.13	2.26	.03
Did you like salesperson	.74	2.07	1.95	.05
Was S.P. dominant	6.67	7.88	1.58	.06
Would you buy from S.P. in future	2.14	4.10	2.35	.03
Did S.P. like you	2.80	3.75	1.69	.05
Did S.P. affect decision to buy	4.67	6.81	1.78	.05

Table 2

Functional Relationship of Touch Intimacy and Relational Intimacy to Predict Affective Response

Intimacy of Relationship X	Intimacy of Touch Y	Affective Response Z
1	1	2
1	-1	-2
-1	1	-4
-1	-1	0

$Z = x + 2xy - 1$